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OPINION

Traitors, not media threaten freedom

For at least a quarter-century, the Soviet Union has known and complained publicly about submarines from the USA gathering intelligence just off its seacoast.

As early as 1961, the Soviets were griping about it, and our news media dutifully reported both the spying and the griping.

In 1974, press reports described a submarine spy operation code-named "Holystone."

In 1975, there was news of a number of Holystone accidents involving our subs.

Of course, details of the sophisticated technology involved in the spying was a matter of government secrecy.

It remained so until January 1980, when, according to federal court records, a bankrupt former low-level employee of the National Security Agency sold out to the Soviets. Ronald W. Pelton, our government says, spilled his guts for money and revealed these highly classified secrets.

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Pelton is on trial in Baltimore. If convicted, he deserves the stiffest penalty the law provides. But now his trial for treachery has been overshadowed: CIA Director William Casey wants to jail a TV journalist for reporting on the trial.

James Polk, an NBC News correspondent, told viewers Pelton was on trial for selling secrets about an operation called "Ivy Bells." Polk reported that it involved underwater eavesdropping by our subs in Russian harbors. A crime, said Casey. He asked the Justice Department to prosecute.

That's silly. Pelton's lawyer, in a hearing last November, mentioned the code name "Ivy Bells" while questioning a federal agent. If there was any secret about Ivy Bells, the lawyer quite clearly revealed it.

Newspapers and wire services reporting on Casey's complaint about NBC carried accounts — some of them verbatim — of what Polk said. Does the CIA director want to prosecute all of them, too? That's silly; the Soviets already know about Ivy Bells.

Our government is leaking secrets like a sieve — not to the news media, but to the Soviets. Thousands of government workers have secret clearances who shouldn't have them — and got them after the flimsiest security checks.

Many, like Pelton, whose salary as a custodian of secrets was \$24,500 a year, are underpaid. And a startling number are betraying their government for money.

So Casey wants to take action against a reporter and a network. On Wednesday, the CIA said it also might want to prosecute *The Washington Post* for a sanitized article about Pelton. Again, that's silly.

National security was not hurt by this reporting. The Russians already know more, by far, about submarine spying than the taxpayers know, or than journalists know.

The CIA director would do himself and our government a favor if he would concentrate on limiting the amount of information that is classified, stiffening background checks, and closing leaks to the enemies of the USA.

Journalists are not the enemy. To think otherwise is just plain silly.